The weight of stories: on the problematic nature of using narrative in research (0250)

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Abstract
Narrative research 'brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Its usefulness to us as widening participation researchers, therefore, is that it allows us to glimpse in to other people's worlds and make sense of their experiences. However using narrative can be difficult, giving rise to a range of ethical and methodological challenges. Much has been written about the implications of using narrative from the perspective of those offering their accounts. Significantly less has been written about the implications for those who are the recipients of those same accounts, namely narrative researchers. In this paper I draw on narrative research with marginalised learners seeking to access HE (ex-offenders, refugees and asylum seekers, those with long-term disabilities, and care leavers) to describe uncomfortable moments, visceral responses, unexpected accounts, and dealing with the 'sacredness' of stories.

Keywords
Narrative; widening participation; adult learners; ethics; methodology

Paper
Narrative research has gained increasing currency as those involved in supporting the access, retention, and success of underrepresented groups in higher education have sought to understand not just *what* works, by *why* things do. By drawing on in-depth narratives of individuals' experiences researchers can offer a richness and depth to other forms of data. This in turn can help to better inform national policy and institutional practice. As Connelly and Clandinin write, 'narrative research 'brings theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as lived' (Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). Narrative research in its many guises is, however, not only of use to researchers but can also have transformative powers for research participants, as well as practical benefits for those communities under study (Rosenthal, 2003). Rosenthal in her work with survivors of the Shoah (Holocaust), World War 1 veterans and refugees, for example, asserts that just one or two biographical narrative interviews 'can trigger the first curative processes' (2003, p. 916), whilst Powles writes that 'recording refugees' stories enables them to express their experiences and evaluate them within their own terms, historical, social and cultural' (Powles 2004, p. 20). As I have previously written, however, eliciting stories from research participants is not always methodologically simplistic, or ethically straightforward. Indeed, rather than making 'the implicit explicit, the hidden seen, the unformed formed and the confusing clear' (Atkinson 1998, p. 7), narrative research can be riddled with contradictions, complexities, and ambiguities. It is little wonder therefore that guidelines of good practice in undertaking narrative research underpin institutional ethical requirements and that much has been written about the implications of using narrative from the position of those offering their accounts. However, significantly less has been written about the implications for the *recipients* of those same accounts, namely narrative researchers. In this paper I will therefore draw on my own narrative research with marginalised learners seeking to access HE (ex-offenders, refugees and asylum seekers, those with long-term disabilities, and care leavers) to

evidence how eliciting narrative accounts can be both profoundly moving but at times also highly disturbing and how I have sought to deal with and respond to these accounts.

In the first part of the paper I will describe how I have approached using different forms of narrative in my research, including story-telling, and biographical and life history interviews, as well as some of the methodological complications and implications of doing so. This includes the places within which I have researched (including prisons, community centres, and peoples homes) as well as how I have managed responses to conducting narrative interviews (anger, frustration, expectation, and pleasure, both mine and the research participants). I will then focus on a few highly uncomfortable moments which have arisen during narrative interviews, including dealing with disclosures of abuse or expressions of desperate unhappiness. I will also describe some of the visceral responses I have had to the narratives I have been told, for example descriptions of behaviour I have difficulty in comprehending, including from some of those I have interviewed, as well as to hearing stories of appalling ill-treatment meted out against those I have researched with. I will also describe how I have managed, not always successfully, to deal with unexpected accounts of extraordinary resilience and survival, as well as of hilarious stories, the presence of children, grandparents and other relatives in the interview setting, the handing over of babies to play with whilst interviewing, and the offering and eating of copious amounts of food.

In the final part of the paper I will explore how I have dealt, again not always successfully, with the 'sacredness' of stories. Engaging in narrative can involve high level of reflexivity for both researcher and participant (Clegg and Stevenson, 2012). For the research participant it can also be potentially cathartic, healing or transformative since *'when you ask for people's stories, and they tell you what matters most to them or they tell you the meaning of what has happened to them, it is a sacred moment that is shared. In some ways, the experience is akin to what transpires in the confessional relationship. And what could result is very much like what is implied in the Japanese story, "The Tale of Genji", when the character says, "Because you have listened to my story, I can let go of my demons'* (Atkinson, 1998, p. 65). What is not recognised in Atkinson's account, however, is that the 'passing on' of such stories can be problematic for the researcher. I will therefore end the paper by describing how I have dealt with and continue to deal with the weight of some of the stories I have been gifted.

References

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